

Adam fell quiet. Despite his thought-addled state, he was able to recognize the value and importance of what he'd just realized. He shouldn't offer any more information about Lawrence – at least freely.

Which didn't stop the Grandmaster from demanding it.

"Speak!" the Puppet thundered. "Your job is to *speak* to me, Painter! You want Orbs to save Penumbria? You can have them! I'll give you five million Orbs right now if you tell me all you know about Lawrence. *This* is why you matter, Painter – because you hail from the World of Ink. Information is the only true weapon you possess. Brandish it in a parry, or I will have you slain!"

Even in his confused daze, even while being yelled at by a man magnitudes stronger than himself, Adam refused to let himself be intimidated. *Think on the details later. First, remember that you are the Lord of Penumbria.*

He lifted his eyes to meet the Grandmaster's gaze and dared to take a step forward. "You're damn right this information is valuable," Adam shouted. "Which is why 5 million Orbs is an insultingly low offer. I want 50 million."

The Grandmaster had been sent into a state of pure shock. His ancient, wooden body seemed to twist and turn, as if his bafflement was such that the very sorcery that created him needed a moment to collect itself.

"Across the sacred oceans and the accursed mountains," he began, "there has never been a Puppet stronger than the one who stands before you. For centuries I have lived, and for centuries my Talents have sharpened into a weapon deadlier than your mortal mind could conceive. I am the last Son of the Dragons, the Last of the Dragon Puppets, the First of the Arch Puppets! Knowledge that extends beyond your kind's existence flows through these veins – veins that *my might* has created for myself. This, *boy*, is who you stand before."

He growled out in fury, smoke spewing from his wooden nostrils. "And you dare attempt to *bargain* with me?"

"Yeah," Adam frankly stated. "I mean..." He tried to find gentler, grander words to match the Grandmaster's soliloquy, then gave up with a shrug. "I mean, my people still need to eat. And not get devoured by Rot. So...yeah. Orbs please?"

By this point the Grandmaster had grown so exasperated that it looped back into tiredness, prompting him to sit down and shake his head. "Though we know some details of your world, our knowledge is limited, Painter. Which is why I must ask – what kind of monster raised you?"

"Capitalism." Adam sighed. "So. Do we have a deal?"

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They did not, in fact, have a deal.

After much debating and a few death threats, Adam found himself exiting the Grandmaster's Workshop and heading down its network of tunnels. Without a guide. He didn't think the Grandmaster would let him die before extracting as much information out of him as possible, but he *had* pissed off the man enough that he was happy to let Adam stumble around aimlessly for a while.

Normally he'd be fine with that, but unfortunately, there were still a couple things he needed to get done. No matter what.

Specifically, there were two tasks left, and thereby lied difficulty within difficulty. First, Adam had to do what he'd been avoiding since his duel with the Ghost of Waters – have an earnest conversation with Tenver. *He wanted me to find out he was a Puppet...and I'd already been suspecting that for a while. Probably means we should talk about it.* Finding the right words there wouldn't be easy.

Still, it would be easier than his second task – actually *finding* Tenver in the middle of a network of underground tunnels. Its pathways twisted and turned so much Adam that hadn't found a single other living being for hours. Where were the houses? The people? Damn it all to hell, he'd even accept monsters showing up now, if only so he wouldn't be alone. This was starting to drive him mad.

"This place is a bloody maze, eh?" Adam muttered to no one in particular. His tablet made for a very good flashlight, but being able to see was only one part of navigating a maze. "How the hell does anyone get around in here?"

"Oh, they usually don't," Tenver said, from behind him. "It's by design. Invading the Mines is difficult, but not impossible – yet can you imagine an army fighting in these tunnels? Ah, my lord, it would be a rout!"

Adam bit his lip. *Stay calm...this is his game. Pretend you're not surprised. Pretend you don't want to strangle him.* After a deep breath, he spoke up with an even-keeled voice. "Have you been following me?"

"Why, I am your knight, Lord Adam!" Tenver's exclamation sounded like a parody of an objection. "Your safety is my most sacred of duties – nay, my *only* duty!"

"I'll take that as a yes, then." Adam allowed himself a sigh. "Let's go somewhere private. We need to talk."

"That we do."

If the request came as a surprise, Tenver didn't show it. A moment later, he grasped his lord's arm and started to gently pull them through a series of turns and false doors. Adam almost put up a token protest, but stopped himself. "Looks like you managed to get your arm attached back on," he noted, absently. "Good as new, I hope?"

"Sadly not." Tenver forced out an exaggerated sigh. He clearly was bothered by it, but wanted to appear otherwise. "It feels slower now...not that I've ever been a master swordsman. Much prefer to fight from a distance."

"Wouldn't have guessed that when I first met you," Adam grunted. "Never saw you using a goddamn bow until the Ghost showed."

"I must apologize for that." For a moment, Tenver's voice sounded strained. "But you must understand that if word of my...*arm* got back to the capital, my chances of wrestling my way into the Imperial court would be void."

Adam lifted an eyebrow. "Planning on betraying me? Thought you wanted to take down the Emperor."

"But I do." Tenver forced a smile. "If your aim is to rob a man blind of his titles, then empty his pockets of allies first. Trust me, I'd know."

"Considering what you've done before..." Adam trailed off, remembering the nobles that Tenver executed in his name. "You could mean this politically, or in a more lethal sense, and I'd have no way of knowing which."

Tenver shrugged, his right shoulder slightly lagging behind his left. "Either would be fine," he said, with a jovial tone. *Too jovial to be honest*, Adam thought, grimly. Then, as if reading his mind, the knight went on to speak in a more somber voice. "I cannot afford to be picky when I've already wasted my first chance like a coward."

"We're past riddles," Adam snapped. "I know you're a Puppet – and I don't give a damn. After that, you can't *really* be afraid of how I'll react to other things, can you?"

"You would be surprised," Tenver muttered. He furtively glanced around. "I'll answer, but not here. Follow me."

The two continued their way down the path in silence. Once or twice, Adam thought to interrupt with a question, but just keeping his balance in these darkened caves was taking all of his focus. *He's right about one thing...no invading army could take over the Puppet Mines like this. Well, unless it's vulnerable to some forced collapsing, or something of the sort.* Considering the elaborate lengths they'd gone through with the maze, however, he doubted such a weakness existed.

At times, they would have to climb up an entrance Adam hadn't even noticed. At other times, the two would reach a door, only for Tenver to smirk and show that it led to a hole so deep Adam couldn't see the bottom with his flashlight.

Eventually, much later, they arrived at the spot Tenver had been leading them towards.

It took Adam a moment to react to the sight before him. His vision wasn't the issue – there were a set of glowing stones placed against each wall, emitting bright green lights, illuminating everything around with an ethereal sort of look. Rather, what troubled him was the sight beyond.

There was a river. It looked perfectly unremarkable, yet that just made it stand out even more. Seeing running water in an underground set of caverns felt alien, unnatural.

Adam's eyes traced the river's gently meandering slopes, its smooth surface reflecting the stones' shining light, creating a surreal dance of color that captivated his senses. He took in the unexpected luxury of a table set for two amidst the rugged interior of the cave, its white cloth pristine against the raw backdrop, the chairs inviting, and an array of bottles shimmering subtly under the green hue.

"Why the extravagance?" Adam finally asked, his voice echoing slightly in the vastness of the cave. "We're not drinking to my death, I hope."

"You did say you brought me here to have a few drinks," Tenver joyfully replied. He pulled out a chair for Adam, adorned with an old-world charm that seemed out of place in the cave's otherworldly setting. "Besides, no one else knows how to get in here – not even other Puppets. And the river," he gestured towards the flowing water at the cave's end, "is a better guardian than any armed company. Its sound runs loud enough to deafen anyone who *did* manage to sneak up on us."

Adam hesitated, but curiosity and a desire not to back down won out over his fear. As he sat down, he was surprised by how comfortable the chair felt. How had Tenver moved a masterfully-crafted piece of furniture down here?

The knight took his place opposite of Adam, and with practiced ease, poured a deep amber liquid into the two glasses displayed before them. "I always liked coming here when staying in the Mines." Tenver smirked. "No Puppet, no Emperors, no blades out for my neck." He pushed a glass towards Adam. "In the Mines, it is customary that if you exchange a drink with someone, you will not harm them until at least the day after your farewell."

Adam's gaze flicked from his glass to the knight's unreadable grin. "You've been screwing with me for too long, Tenver. I already told you I want *answers*."

"And answers I shall give, my lord," he assured, his eyes locking with Adam's. "But first, we need to be on the same page. What we say, what we do—" he waved his hand, gesturing at the cave "—it stays within these walls. Can you do that for me, my lord?"

Adam nodded. Tenver's quivering lip didn't escape his notice. *You just want more time to prepare yourself for whatever you have to say, don't you?* He lifted the glass, a scent of aged spirit mingling with the damp earthiness of the cave.

"To trust, then," Tenver raised his glass slightly.

"To the truth," Adam replied. They both drank, sealing their pact of etiquette amidst the Puppetry.

Then, almost mercilessly, Tenver brought that calm moment to an end.

"You can probably deduce – or at least guess – most of my past," he began. "So, lord of mine. Care to elucidate me as to your thinking?"

"Oh, shut up already, *Your Bloody Highness*." Adam's eyes narrowed into a glare. "Unless you want me to call you that, then answer me with my goddamn name."

That seemed to bring the man out of his hazy thoughts, dispelling the dark cloud of nostalgia with a knightly grin that seemed to be his signature as of late. "Ah...fine, Adam." He chuckled at the name, as if somehow it were a joke in and of itself. "How much do you know?"

"Well, your father is the former Emperor, you were effectively banished to middle-of-nowhere-Penumbria, and you were turned into a Puppet. Based on a few things I caught here and there...I'm guessing your father was killed by your dear old uncle, as you put it?"

"Correct!" Tenver exclaimed, raising his drink skyward. Adam thought it was a grim toast, but reluctantly clanked his glass against the knight's. "It still feels strange to me. The man's title has always been 'uncle,' yet now he's head of the Empire. Of my very family, even."

Adam nodded, then turned his glass a few times, studying the blood-red wine inside. "A little more than kin, a little less than kind, that uncle of yours," he absently quoted.

"Quite poetic of you." Tenver tilted his head. "Do you grace me with your own cleverness here, or are you quoting that which I have yet to read?"

"Let's call it cleverness," Adam replied, not meeting his eyes. *Interesting. The Grandmaster knows some Earth culture, but Tenver doesn't, despite being a high-ranking Puppet. Well, either that or he isn't very aware of our literature, but...come on. Doesn't everyone know Hamlet?* "And I presume the motive for your father's murder was that he was too kind to non-humans?"

"So I have always thought – though the official line is that my father was betrayed by Puppets." Tenver grimaced at the recollection. "My dear old uncle – the so-called Emperor Ciro – made it seem as if the very beings my father asked the population to show mercy to...were monsters. Mighty effective, that treachery."

He barked out a hollow laugh. "Even those who'd started listening to my father's appeals turned against the Puppets once more. All out of a misguided desire to avenge someone who'd want nothing of the sort."

Adam restrained his impulse to blurt out the first question that came to mind. This was a delicate topic, and although indelicate questions would be necessary, there was no reason to be more callous than the situation demanded. Hesitantly, in a low voice, he asked, "What *did* happen to you and your father, Tenver?"

"We were supposed to meet with the Puppets to negotiate their fealty to the Empire. It was a serious possibility at the time, as there were enough Puppet settlements to make the matter vital. We had a mostly uneventful journey down the desert, until...well, our honor guard turned against us."

"Your uncle...*Emperor* *Ciro*," Adam tentatively said, seeing if the title appeared less hurtful to the man. There was no change in his expression. "He had your own guards massacre you?"

"That he did. We retained a small set of loyal guards, of course, but the Imperial Guard was but two dozen men, and we were riding down the desert without much in the way of protection. Despite a few brief skirmishes with some Puppet rebels who disliked the idea of unity between our people, it had been a relatively bloodless journey by the time we reached the oasis. Yet when he hailed *Ciro*..."

Tenver paused. His face betrayed no emotion, but his glass trembled in a vice grip. "He ordered his archers to eclipse the sun with his arrows. There was no fighting, no dance of Talents, nothing bards would sing of. Only death."

"But your father was Emperor. His Talent must surely have—"

"Not inside my uncle's *Domain*. You know how the Lord Talent works, yes? While a highly-Talented individual may expand their Domain outside their own city, it is weaker, more limited. *Ciro*, however, was different. He chose to *undo* his entire Domain and reform it at the oasis, which gave him the advantage in raw power."

Adam shook his head. "No, I don't understand. If he did that, how did he keep his city – the original domain he held – from being swallowed by Rot?"

Tenver let out a bitter laugh. "That's just the thing, Adam. He didn't." At some point the knight had refilled his drink. He proceeded to finish it all in one motion. "Are you familiar with Aspreay's birthplace? *That* is how it was overrun with the Rot. Its former lord abandoned it."

"How..." Adam trailed off. He dared't finish the thought out loud. *How many thousands died for that one ambush?*

"My father survived, anyhow," Tenver quietly said. "Maybe if he'd continued to fight them fairly, he would have killed them all. Sometimes I tell myself that. But he didn't. Do you know why, Adam? Because *I* was there. Because I was injured. Killed, maybe, who knows. It would've taken even father a

long time to fight Ciro and his army. Instead, he grabbed me – my corpse, perhaps – and turned his back to the men trying to kill him.

"He dragged me all the way to the Airship. Captain Baltzar was one of the few who survived Ciro's treachery. He set course for the Mines, and once I got there...they managed to treat my injuries, but father's were too severe."

It took Tenver a few moments to continue speaking. His eyes flashed with a dull yet insistent pain, the kind that always came back no matter how many times it was suppressed. "Months, maybe a year later, and I was myself again. By that point Ciro had already solidified his position, eradicated the Puppets outside of the Mine, and led a massacre against the elves."

A burning question leaped to Adam's mind, but he didn't think it was time to ask it yet – not the least because he didn't think Tenver had an answer. *How did they save you, while your father was somehow too far gone?* "I imagine news of your survival didn't give Ciro cause to celebrate."

"No, that it did not." Tenver smirked a little. "He invited me back to court, and I gallantly agreed. Ah, was I young at the time...still thought I could gather enough allies to fight for justice. Figured that even Ciro wouldn't try to kill me in the middle of the capital, where so many supporters of my late father still lived. And do you know what the worst part of it all is, Adam?"

Adam hesitated. "That you didn't find enough supporters?"

"No. That I *did*." Tenver didn't bother refilling his glass. This time he just turned the bottle upside down over his mouth, letting too much of the drink fall into it. "Some people were on my side. Young nobles, with little power in court but an excess of righteousness in their hearts. They...they *believed* in me. Rallied to my cause, said that Ciro was only crowned Emperor because everyone had assumed I was dead. '*Tenver is the legitimate heir,*' they claimed. We didn't touch on the murder accusations – too heavy, too few survivors to serve as proof, and my youth and lack of power meant that my words would hold little weight."

An idea came to Adam. It was a loathsome train of thought to ride, yet he couldn't stop himself from stepping aboard. If he were in Ciro's position, the next logical move would be...

"He had your friends and supporters arrested, didn't he?" Adam surmised. "On false charges, I presume, as to not give your faction validity. Your father had too many big name supporters – although most didn't rally to your cause so much as gently support it – for *Ciro* to attack *you* outright. But your friends–"

"He tortured them," Tenver said, quietly. He gazed at the river with a haunted expression on his face, more ghosts about him than Adam had ever seen on a man. "When I refused to withdraw my formal claim, *Ciro* took me to see one of my friends down in the dungeons. Adam, what I saw there...he wasn't *human* anymore."

For the first time since the two had met, Adam saw Tenver openly tremble at a memory. The knight's face paled, and his wrist shook erratically enough for his metallic armor to clank against the wooden table, tapping in an eerie, harsh rhythm. "They had flayed him alive, Adam, His arms were mutilated, leaving just enough bloody stumps to hang him from the ceiling with rusty chains. Save for the dried pool of blood beneath him, there was little evidence that his legs, or even most of his lower body, had ever been there.

"Yet they kept him alive.

"He looked at me, I think.

"It was hard to know for sure as his eyelids had long been burned off, but the way his muscles twitched made it seem as though, even in that half-mad state, he'd recognized me. He opened his mouth – and for a moment, I froze. Was he going to curse me for leaving him in such a state? Mayhap he'd ask me to avenge him? Somedays, I even dare to dream that he wanted to absolve me of my sins; to tell me that it wasn't my fault.

"This knowledge will never be mine, you see, for they had cut off his tongue as well."

Tenver sank into a deep silence. His grip tightened around the bottle, and he chuckled, as if to make light of his sudden anger. A moment later, even the disguising chuckle was gone, the bottle shattering

within his closed fist. "I begged my uncle to kill him, as a mercy, and to refrain from doing the same to any more of my supporters. That's when the serpent bared its venom.

*'Well, my boy, I would be happy to do so – if you would accept a self-imposed banishment to Penumbria. None of your followers will think of it as me forcing it on you, especially if I bestow my doomed duchy upon your shoulders. Do you disagree?'*

"I took his deal." Tenver's voice was full of shame, and it cracked at the end. "Mayhap, had I stayed, much pain could've been prevented in the Empire. Would Ciro have still committed such evils if he was afraid that his brother's son would rally to oppose him? Would I have been able to depose the usurper and deliver justice for all those he wronged? Mayhap so. Yet when I think of...of that skinless face...I couldn't let anyone else suffer that fate because of me, Adam. I was weak."

"You were a child," the painter quickly replied. "No one in your position—"

"I was *Prince!*" Tenver shouted. He refused to meet Adam's eyes. "It was my duty to give my life to protect my people, to shield them from whatever or whoever might threaten..."

He trailed off and shook his head, a manic chuckle forcing its way into his voice. "I needed to stop Ciro – no matter what! But I didn't. I merely accepted my self-imposed banishment to Penumbria, then did what I could to help...whoever I could. Which, as you may guess, wasn't much.

"Sure, I kept contact with the Grandmaster. My title was still vastly important to the Empire. We would talk of making a difference, of one day saving people from the Emperor. But in truth? We knew it would never happen. At least I did. Even so, I kept my Puppetry a secret, clinging to the notion that – under the right circumstances – I might make a comeback and usurp the title as Ciro did to my father. Yet in the dark of night, there was nothing to keep one persistent thought from entering my mind.

*"There is no one in this world who can help me."*

"And so I continued that miserable life I was given after my rebirth. The life that should never have been granted to me again. Day after day of helping a single person, all because I was too weak to save thousands by opposing my uncle. Aspreay doubted me, the common people whispered of me, and years

passed this way. Then, one day, I heard news from the Grandmaster. A man from the World of Ink had arrived in our world. And that's...when I met you, Adam."

Adam nodded slowly, recalling their first meeting. It had been odd for Penumbria's guards to find a lone man outside the barrier so quickly. "You could feel the Stained Ink within me, couldn't you?" he asked. "That's how you tracked me?"

"I could, and I did," Tenver acknowledged. "After that, when I saw you deal with Aspreay...and most of all, your *reasons* for doing it...well, I decided it right then when I saw you sit upon that throne.

*"Even if there isn't anyone in this world who can bring justice to these lands...this man isn't from this world, is he?"*

He let out a sigh. "And that, Adam, is the full story. You could easily paint my entire soul now if you wished. I wasn't certain I would survive a duel with the Ghost, but it was important to me that you knew why I have been – why I *am* this person. If you want, you may speak with the Grandmaster; we were up all night using their Communications Talent to prepare my entire history in a spoken message to you. Mayhap if you require more detail–"

"Wait."

Adam sat up, a frown spreading across his face. He really wished his brain hadn't narrowed its focus down to one singular detail. What he should have done was rise, embrace his friend, and give him...*something* to hold on to after recalling all those memories. Yet his mind was racing with possibilities, and he couldn't stop the thought from arising. Worst of all, there was an amused twinkle in Tenver's eyes, as if the man had expected him to notice that small detail.

"Wait, you *bastard*," Adam muttered, in an utterly baffled tone. "Is *THAT* where you were during the night of the murder? Back aboard the ship? That's why you weren't in your room?"

Tenver burst out with booming, relaxed laughter. The man must have laughed for what was a full minute, throwing his head back and needing visible effort to keep his chair from toppling over. He gave an elaborate shrug, tossing away the broken shards of the wine bottle as he did, and then smirked at

Adam. "My lord, I *did* say I had a witness, didn't I? You were the one who assumed it was you. I never lied."

"**BULLSHIT!**" Adam cried out, his voice cracking in a high-pitched mixture of disbelief and exasperation. "YOU LITERALLY SAID I WAS YOUR WITNESS!"

"Did I?" Tenver frowned in remembrance for a moment, then flashed a guilty smile. "Oh, yeah. I did. Sorry about that, my lord. Really tried to keep the lies to a minimum but, well, things worked easier that way. The ghost of truth was in my words, although its corpse lay elsewhere."

"Shut up and go become a ghost you fucking lunatic!" Adam shouted. "And why is it that you only call me 'my lord' when being a sarcastic jackass?"

"I have never done such a thing," Tenver said, his voice a mockery of insult. He held their gaze for an extended, torturous moment. "...My lord."

"BASTARD!"

The two laughed and insulted each other for a long while after that. With every laugh, every mockery, the two grew more relaxed. It felt nice not to keep so many secrets from each other.

*He knows I'm not from this world,* Adam realized, in the midst of his seventh insult. *I can actually tell him about...so much.* Tenver, for his part, seemed back to his old self, acting just like when they'd spent those days together in Aspreay's tower. Everything about his strange behavior up until now was easier to understand, and Adam could *feel* the tension leaving his body. While there was no alcohol left for them, they didn't need it anymore.

*Maybe...* Did he even dare finish the thought? *Maybe...I can actually trust him.*

It was a forbidden thought, something he'd sworn to never do again. But Tenver had revealed practically everything to him. His story. His arm.

His soul.

There was still an element of danger, of course. Tenver could easily betray him. Even if the knight had good intentions, there was probably an argument to be made that he could maneuver his way into the Imperial court by delivering Adam's head on a spike. That way, he could try to help as many people as possible – at the cost of one meager friend. It was a possibility. It was a risk.

*But I still want to trust him.*

Adam hesitantly opened his mouth.

"What is it?" Tenver asked, smiling. "Got something to tell me?"

"I...do." Adam drew a deep breath. "You already know that I come from somewhere else."

"Aye, that is correct."

The Painter heaved a heavy sigh. If just thinking about it pained him, talking about it would hurt a hell of a lot more. Not that he could complain – Tenver had it much worse than him. "What you don't know is what I've been...why I *am* the person I am," he finished, with a grin that his friend was happy to reciprocate. "Before I came to this world, I–"

"C'mon bro, that's not fair," said a new voice. "Don't go badmouthing me to your friends like that. I want to make a good first impression, eh?"

Adam and Tenver whirled around in a hurry. Neither of them had noticed the newcomer stalk into the room, nor had they noticed the sudden blue candle-fire that floated around him as he flew downward towards them.

"Man. Finding you was annoying as hell." The newcomer's cloak fluttered as if it had a life of its own, colors shifting every second. One moment it was dark blue, the next, bright green. And wherever the stranger stepped, translucent petals seemed to bloom, shining a vibrant pink before vanishing into a saturated blue mist. "But I guess I finally found you."

*This has to be a dream*, Adam thought. He was beyond surprise, anger, or joy. His emotional core was numb – he simply couldn't process the sight before him. "Are you...are you serious?"

His tablet confirmed what his eyes would not accept.

## **Eric Gryphon**

### *Imperial Hangman*

"I'm always serious, bro. You know me," Eric said, flashed a grin and tilted his neck. "Come on – you missed me, didn't you, Adam?"

The question barely registered. Adam waited to see what emotion would take over his body first. Would it be sheer, undeniable shock? Perhaps relief would be the one. He had to feel *some* measure of comfort over someone else from Earth being here. It meant he wouldn't have to wonder if he was just a crazy local who'd dreamt up his old life.

Anger was another good guess. It was a powerful emotion; the kind to easily overwhelm a man. Fear would have also been another strong contender, due to either Eric's past as Adam's friend, or his present as the Emperor's Hangman.

None of those emotions seized upon the Painter's body.

In fact, no emotions seized upon him at all. His heart was an unpainted, ill-cared canvas covered in dust, scratches, and yet untouched by ink.

Which meant that when Adam wrapped the Stained Ink around his wrist and rushed towards Eric with the intention to kill, he wasn't blinded by his emotions.

"Eric..."

Rather, this was a cold, calculated decision of what simply needed to be done. Plans and considerations burned in the back of his mind, all taking second place to the cold call of murder from deep within his heart.

"The world is a better place without you, Eric."

Adam sharpened the Stained Ink into an arrowhead.